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The Role of Implicit & Explicit Corrective Feedback in Persian-speaking EFL Learners' Awareness of and Accuracy in English Grammar

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Abstract

While various studies have investigated the effectiveness of certain types of error treatment methods, there has been little research conducted to examine the effect of different types of corrective feedback on EFL learners' grammar accuracy and awareness through eliciting repeated performances. The current research was designed to investigate the effect of implicit and explicit corrective feedback on EFL learners' awareness of and accuracy in English grammar. The sample of study consisted of 60 Iranian EFL pre-intermediate learners which were randomly divided into two groups namely explicit and implicit. In this study a series of tests, in the form of Persian sentences in simple present and past tense were administered to the learners and they were asked to write their English equivalents. To assess the learners' level of awareness of English grammar two tests containing ten English sentences in simple past and present tense with wrong verb forms, constructed by the researcher were administered to the learners and they were asked to identify the errors and write their correct forms. Before administering these tests, present and past simple tense were taught to the both groups of learners (implicit & explicit group) in three sessions. The results of the study indicated that grammar accuracy and awareness of both implicit and explicit groups improved. Besides, explicit group outperformed implicit group and it seems that explicit corrective feedback is more effective than implicit one. These results emphasize the importance, of providing corrective feedback in EFL settings where teacher's instruction and feedback are the most important ways through which learners can improve their language proficiency.

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1. Introduction

Debate on the notion of errors and corrective feedback is a controversial issue and research in this area has a long history. One of the main reasons is that these two terms are ambiguous and have been defined in different ways. Another reason is that findings of the research on the effect of corrective feedback on the learning process have been conflicting, mainly due to the widely varying learner populations, types of writing and feedback types provided and various research designs used (Hyland, 2006). Over the last few years, the role played by corrective feedback in language acquisition has become a highly important issue. From an interactionist view, corrective feedback is an important means of establishing the significance of reader responses in shaping meanings and it is seen as an important developmental tool moving learners through multiple drafts towards the capability for effective self-expression (Probst, 1989).

It has long been assumed by teachers of a second or foreign language and by researchers working in the area of corrective feedback that corrective feedback provision by the teachers helps students to acquire correct linguistic forms and structures. As a result, they have been concerned with discovering the most effective ways of providing corrective feedback so that students improve the accuracy of their (written performance). Although so much research done in the field confirms the positive effects of corrective feedback, many other studies claim that the research designs were not rich.

1.1. Purpose of the Study

Since corrective feedback has long been regarded as an essential strategy for the development of a second or foreign language learning skills, this study aimed at investigating the role of implicit and explicit corrective feedback in EFL learners' grammatical accuracy in and their awareness of certain grammatical structures of English language (present and past simple tenses). In other words, this study was to investigate whether or not there is a positive role for two different methods of error correction (implicit and explicit) in learners' accuracy in and awareness of certain English structures.

1.2. Practical Applications

One of the practical applications of this study is that both implicit and explicit corrective feedback help learners improve their accuracy in and awareness of English grammar, thus using them in educational settings is beneficial. The other one is that explicit corrective feedback is more useful than implicit one and leads to more improvement in grammar accuracy and awareness, thus the former it is preferred to the later in similar situations.

2. Literature Review

Ferris and Roberts (2001) examined the effects of three different feedback treatments (errors marked with codes, errors underlined but not labeled or marked, no error feedback, significantly outperformed the group who didn't receive any, but they found that there was no significant difference between the performance of the group without coded feedback (In the coded feedback strategy, the exact place of the error is determined and the error type is marked with a code, for example, P S means an error in the use or form of the past simple tense; uncoded feedback refers to cases in which the teacher underlines an error, or places an error in the margin of the paper, but it's learner's duty to identify the correct forms of erroneous structures).

Ferris (2004) has investigated the effects of different treatment conditions on both text revisions and new pieces of writing. He reported that direct (explicit) corrective feedback leads to more correct revisions (88 %) than indirect one (71%). However, in the middle of the semester, students who received indirect corrective feedback reduced their error frequency rates substantially more than those who received direct feedback.

Tomasello and Herron's (1989) study found that learners who were first allowed to make mistakes and were then corrected improved their target language performance more than learners who were given language rules.

Lightbown and Spada (1990) in their study on the effects of corrective feedback and form-focused instruction on second language acquisition in the context of intensive ESL (English as a second language) programs, aimed at examining the relationships between instruction, interaction and acquisition. The findings of this study shows that over all language skills are developed through meaning-based instruction in which corrective feedback strategy is used.

White (1994) in her study on the effectiveness of from-focused instruction, positive and negative evidence on learners' acquisition of the structures of the target language concluded that explicit evidence, both positive and negative, is more useful in helping learners acquire the true structures of the target language.

Although these studies have dealt with different issues regarding corrective feedback, it seems that dealing with the effect of corrective feedback provision through repeated performances would be worth doing.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The sample of this study consists of 60 Iranian Persian-speaking pre-intermediate EFL learners of Bahar institute. Oxford Placement Test was used to determine the participants' proficiency levels. They were divided randomly into two groups namely Explicit and Implicit corrective feedback groups, (cited E-group and I-group hereafter).

3.2. Materials and Procedures

In this study a series of tests, in the form of Persian sentences in simple present and past tense were administered to the learners and they were asked to write their English equivalents. To assess the learners' level of awareness of English grammar two tests containing ten English sentences in simple past and present tense with wrong verb forms, constructed by the researcher were administered to the learners and they were asked to identify the errors and write their correct forms. Before administering these tests, present and past simple tense were taught to the both groups of learners (implicit & explicit group) in three sessions. The above-mentioned tests were constructed by the researcher based on the materials covered in the textbook taught at Bahar institute. Educational sessions of this institute were held for 90 minutes three times a week during a seven-week period, making a total of twenty two sessions. Nearly in the middle of the semester, present and past simple tense (included in the syllabus) were taught to the learners in three sessions. As mentioned before, the focus of this study was just on the structure of present and past simple tenses of English, in other words, the target structure of this study was the grammar of present and past simple tense.

In the next sessions, the above-mentioned tests were administered to the learners. In each session, one test was administered. Due to time limitations, the allotted time given to the learners for each test was nearly 20 minutes. Then, the test papers were collected by the researcher, corrected and returned to the learners in the next session, to inform them of their errors. Since the level of learners' language proficiency was low, they were allowed to ask the English equivalents of any vocabulary item they didn't know.

The process of teaching the target grammatical structures (present and past simple tenses) and test administrations was the same for both implicit group and explicit group. The only difference lay in the process of corrective feedback: for implicit group, the errors were underlined, but for implicit group, the erroneous structures were underlined by the researcher and they were provided with the correct forms of their errors. These processes of test administrations and corrective feedback provision were repeated in four sessions and the learners performances are compared and analyzed in data analysis section.

Because the focus of our study is just on the particular grammatical structures of English language (simple past & simple present tenses) other erroneous structures seen in the learners papers (orthographic errors, noun ending errors, article errors, wrong word errors, etc.) were not taken into account.

To assess the level of learners awareness of English grammar, the two above-mentioned tests were administered to the learners of both I-group and E-group, one at the beginning before the process of corrective feedback provision started and the other one at the end when consecutive processes of corrective feedback provision and test administrations finished .The learners were asked to identify the errors and write their correct forms and mention why they are wrong.

4. Data analysis and Results

To test the research hypotheses, mixed repeated measures ANOVA, paired-sample t-test and independent sample t-test were performed and descriptive statistics were calculated. Paired-sample t-test was performed to test the first two research hypotheses, according to which explicit and implicit corrective feedbacks have no effect on EFL learners' awareness level of English grammar. Mixed repeated measures ANOVA was performed to test fourth, third and sixth research hypotheses according to which, explicit and implicit corrective feedback does not help EFL learners to improve their accuracy in English grammar learning. An independent sample t-test was performed to compare grammar awareness of I- group and E- group.

The results of paired sample statistics for E-group revealed that the mean scores of the group were 2/75 and 5/89 in two tests respectively. Obviously, their mean score has improved in the second test.

To test if this observed difference was significant, a paired sample t-test was run. The results of t-test revealed that there was a significant difference between these two mean scores ($t=-7/106$, $df=28$, $p</math>0/05). This means that explicit corrective feedback increases learners' awareness level of English grammar.$

Table 1. Paired sample t-test for explicit group.

Paired Samples Test									
		Paired Differences				t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
			Std.	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Mean				Lower
Pair 1	Explicit pre – explicit post	-3.62069	2.74400	.50955	-4.66445	-2.57693	-7.106	28	.000

The results of the paired sample statistics for I-group revealed that the mean scores of learners were 1/933 and 4/533 in two successive tests respectively. Clearly, their mean score has improved in the second test. To see if the observed difference was significant, a paired samples t-test was performed. The results of t-test show that there was a significant difference between these two mean scores ($t = -4/557$, $df = 29$, $p<$ 0/05). That is, implicit corrective

feedback increases EFL learners' awareness level of English grammar.

Table 2. Paired sample t-test for implicit group.

Paired Samples Test									
		Paired Differences							Sig. (2-tailed)
			Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Mean	Lower	Upper		
Pair 1	Implicit pre implicit post	-2.6000 0	3.12498	.57054	-3.76689	-1.43311	-4.557	29	.000

The results of the descriptive statistics for E-group show that the mean scores of learners were: 6, 6/76, 7/23 and 7/33 in four consecutive tests respectively. This means that their mean scores improved in consecutive tests. To test if the observed differences among mean scores were significant, a mixed repeated measures ANOVA was run. The results of ANOVA, show that the observed differences were significant ($f= 33/57$, $p<0/05$).

The results of descriptive statistics for I-group show that the mean scores of this group were 6/83, 7, 7/20 and 7/23 in four successive tests receptively. Clearly, their mean scores have improvement in consecutive tests. To see if the observed differences were significant, a mixed repeated measures ANOVA was run the results of which reveal that the observed difference among the learners mean scores in consecutive tests was significant ($f= 3/04$, $p< 0/05$).

The results of group statistics for both I-group and E-group, presented in table 4.14, show that the mean scores of these groups are 4/43 and 6 respectively. Obviously, their mean scores are different. To see if the observed difference is significant or not an independent sample t-test was performed the results of which are presented in table 4.15. As table 4.15 shows, the difference is significant ($t=2/83$, $p</05$). This means that the level of learners' awareness of English grammar in I-group and E-group is different and apparently E-group outperformed I-group, that is, they are more aware of English grammar.

Table 3. Independent samples t-test for I-group and E-group

Independent Samples Test										
		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
score	Equal variances assumed	.31	.57	2.837	58	.006	1.56	.55	.46	2.67

	Equal variances not assumed			2.837	57.85	.006	1.56	.55	.46	2.67
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5. Discussion

As mentioned before, a number of studies (Truscott 1999, Ashwell 2000, Ferris & Roberts 2001, Bitchener 2008) have investigated the impact of corrective feedback on the student's writing accuracy improvement. A great number of these studies (Truscott 1999, Bitchener 2008) have distinguished between the effects of direct and indirect corrective feedback, mostly these studies report conflicting results. Some believe that there is no main effect for corrective feedback and there was not any significant difference between the performance of the learners who received corrective feedback and those who did not. Some other researchers believe that significantly those who received corrective feedback out performed their counterparts who did not receive any feedback.

Some research reports that they have distinguished between the effect of different error treatment methods such as explicit and implicit corrective feedback and found that explicit group made improvement in their performance, but implicit group did not. Guenette (2007) attribute these conflicting results to the differences and flaws in research designs and methodology, besides, the majority of the studies done have measured learners accuracy only on rewrites and it remains unclear whether the students who receive error feedback also perform more accurately in subsequent assignments over time than those who are not provided with any feedback by their teachers.

Those studies which support indirect corrective feedback suggest that this approach is better than explicit corrective feedback, because it requires students to engage in guided learning and problem solving and as a result promotes the type of reflection that leads to long-term acquisition. Those in favour of direct feedback suggest that it is more helpful for learners because it reduces the confusion that they may experience when they fail to understand or remember the meaning of error codes used by teachers and provides them with sufficient information about their errors.

In contrast to some previous research which had reported negative or no effect for corrective feedback on learners improvement, the results of the study showed that both implicit and explicit group improved their accuracy in successive tests and this shows that both implicit and explicit corrective feedback strategies have useful effects on learners' improvement in the process of English language learning and their awareness of English grammar. The other finding of this study was that E-group outperformed I-group in the successive tests, that is, somehow we can say explicit corrective feedback is more useful than implicit one in the process of teaching and learning the grammar of a new language.

6. Conclusion

All in all, the results of the present study indicated that the Iranian EFL learners of English improved their grammar accuracy and their level of awareness of English grammar as a result of receiving corrective feedback. These results emphasize the importance, of providing corrective feedback in EFL settings where teacher's instruction and feedback are the most important ways through which learners can improve their language proficiency.

Overall, we cannot expect that the learners learn a target structure without making errors, in other words, errors are inevitable in the process of language learning, but we can reduce the number of these errors through providing the learners with corrective feedback, because according to the findings of this study it seems that learners attend to the kind of corrective feedback provided by their teachers and use them to make positive changes in their performances. That is, it seems that corrective feedback facilitates language learning process.

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